POETRY IN PROSE

THREE ESSAYS

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" Le sens de la cadence en prose n'a rien de commun avec le sens de la musique ; c'est un sens tout physiologique. On rhythme sa sensation, obscurément, comme des cris de joie, des cris de douleur prolongés. Et tout se nuance ainsi, s'adapte à la pensée mieux en prose qu'en vers. La prose est un outil plus compliqué et en même temps plus souple, mais qui dévie si facilement ! "

REMY DE GOURMONT.

" And a like deference to a standard higher than one's own habitual standard in intellectual matters, a like respectful recognition of a superior ideal, is caused, in the intellectual sphere, by sensitiveness of intelligence. Those whose intelligence is quickest, openest, most sensitive, are readiest with this deference ; those whose intelligence is less delicate and sensitive are less disposed to it."

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

" Je ne comprends pas comment vous vous occupez autant les uns des autres; vous perdez votre temps à des riens."

HONORÉ DE BALZAC.

Prose and Verse

By T. S. Eliot.

ON the subject of prose-poetry I have no theory to expound ; but as I find I cannot state my position merely by denying the existence of the subject-matter, I may be excused for explaining it at greater length than a simple denial requires. I have found it convenient to put my remarks in the form of disconnected paragraphs. The present condition of English literature is so lifeless that there surely needs no extenuation of any research into past or possible forms of speech ; the chief benefit of such a symposium as the present is not the verdict but the enquiry : an enquiry which might help to stimulate the worn nerves and release the arthritic limbs of our diction.

The Definition.—I have not yet been given any definition of the prose poem, which appears to be more than a tautology or a contradiction. Mr. Aldington, for example, has provided me with the following : " The prose poem is poetic content expressed in prose form." Poetic content must be either the sort of thing that *is usually*, or the sort of thing that *ought to be*, expressed in verse. But if you say the latter, the prose poem is ruled out ; if you say the former, you have said only that certain things can be said in either prose or verse, or that anything can be said either in prose or verse. I am not disposed to contest either of these conclusions, as they stand, but they do not appear to bring us any nearer to a definition of the prose poem. I do not assume the identification of poetry with verse ; good poetry is obviously something else besides good verse ; and good verse may be very indifferent poetry. I quite appreciate the meaning of anyone who says that passages of Sir Thomas Browne are " poetry," or that Denham's " Cooper's Hill " is not poetry. Also, the former may be good prose, and the latter is certainly good verse ; and Sir Thomas is justified for writing in prose, and Sir John Denham for writing in verse. Mr. Aldington would say that there are two kinds of prose—that of Voltaire or Gibbon, on the one hand, and that of " Gaspard de la Nuit " or " Suspiria

de Profundis " on the other. Perhaps he will admit, what seems to me equally likely, that there are two kinds of verse : we may contrast Poe and Dryden, Baudelaire and Boileau. He might fairly say that we need a fourth term : we have the term " verse " and the term " poetry," and only the one term " prose " to express their opposites. The distinction between " verse " and " prose " is clear ; the distinction between " poetry " and " prose " is very obscure. I do not wish to quibble over " content " ; I know that it is not a question of " subject-matter " so much as of the way in which this subject-matter is treated, apart from its expression in metrical form.

The Value of Verse and Prose.—I take it for granted that prose is allowed to be, potentially or actually, as important a medium as verse, and that it may cost quite as much pains to write. Also that any enjoyment that can be communicated by verse may be communicated by prose, with the exception of the pleasure of metrical form. And there is an equivalent pleasure in the movement of the finest prose, which is peculiar to prose and cannot be compensated by verse. It may, for all that we have yet decided, be proper to call this prose poetry ; but if we deny that *all* of the best prose is poetry, we have got no farther ; and we have still to find two qualities or sets of qualities, and divide the best literature, verse and prose, into two parts which shall exemplify these two qualities. Each group of works of literature will comprehend both verse and prose.

Intensity.—This is sometimes held, implicitly or explicitly, to be a character of poetry and not of prose. It must not be confused with concentration, which is stating or implying much in proportion to the space occupied, or with length, which is a different matter from either. The feeling communicated by a long piece of prose may be more intense than that of a short poem : Newman's Apology is thus more intense than a poem of Anacreon, but this intensity of feeling cannot be extracted from select passages ; you must read the whole book to get it. I should not care to deny intensity to Gibbon's History ; but this intensity is slowly cumulative, and required seven volumes for its communication.

Length.—While the preceding paragraph has pointed to what I believe a valid and useful qualification, it has also come near to juggling with the

term. No long work can maintain the same high tension throughout, and although Gibbon's History, or Newman's Apology, leave a single intense feeling behind, they have in their progress a movement of tension and relaxation. This leads us to Poe's law: that no poem should be more than 100 lines. Poe demands the static poem; that in which there shall be no movement of tension and relaxation, only the capture of a single unit of intense feeling. We are, most of us, inclined to agree with him: we do not like long poems. This dislike is due, I believe, partly to the taste of the day, which will pass, and partly to the abuse of the long poem in the hands of distinguished persons who did not know how to employ it. No one who is willing to take some trouble about his pleasures complains of the *length* of the Divine Comedy, the Odyssey, or even the Aeneid. Any long poem will contain certain matter of ephemeral interest, like some of Dante's divine processions, but this does not imply that the long poem should not have been written—that, in other words, it should have been composed as a number of short poems. The poems I have just mentioned have, in different degrees, the movement toward and from intensity which is life itself. Milton and Wordsworth, on the other hand, lack this unity, and therefore lack life; and the general criticism on most of the long poems of the nineteenth century is simply that they are not good enough.

Verse and Prose Again.—It might be suggested that the proper form would be one which combined verse and prose in waves of intense or relaxed feeling. We have not, however, committed ourselves to the statement that intensity of feeling should be expressed in verse, or that verse should always be intense. And such a mixture of prose and verse would sin against a different kind of unity. A single work must have some metrical unity. This may vary widely in practice: I see no reason why a considerable variety of verse forms may not be employed within the limits of a single poem; or why a prose writer should not vary his cadences almost indefinitely; that is a question for discretion, taste and genius to settle. We seem to see clearly enough that prose is allowed to be "poetic"; we appear to have overlooked the right of poetry to be "prosaic." On the other hand, if we admit the long poem, we surely ought to admit the

short " prose " (we cannot speak conveniently in English, as we can in French, of " Proses " in the plural). And the short prose is, I believe, what most people have in mind when they speak of " poems in prose." (But shortness is evidently not a sufficient characterisation, else we should have to denominate the writings of Mr. Pearsall Smith as " poems " in prose.)

Another Sense of " Poetic " and " Prosaic."—I have spoken only of verse in which there is a more or less periodic movement between intensity and relaxation, but there is another kind of verse which is disparaged. Is " Absalom and Achitophel," is the " Letter to Arbuthnot," poetry ? These are great literature ; and I cannot see that it matters much whether we call them poetry or prose. In any case, they do something that great poetry does : they capture and put into literature an emotion : we may say, in Dryden's case, the emotion of contempt, and in Pope's case, the emotion of hatred or spite. In this sort of verse also there is movement between greater and less intensity.

One Kind of " Poetic " Prose.—A number of prose works, especially several of the seventeenth century, are spoken of as " poetic." Namely, the writings of Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor. We agree with Remy de Gourmont's assertion that it is only the style that preserves literature ; but we must emphasise the " preservation," and ask what is preserved. Possibly by some prejudice or narrowness of taste, I have always held these writers to be of a mediocrity of mind which forbade my taking any keen pleasure in their style. I find them diffuse, and precisely lacking in that intensity which raises the history of Newman's religious doubts to the highest importance even for the otherwise alien reader. But let us examine a passage of one of these authors, which is not unjustly celebrated as a piece of poetic prose :

" Now since these dead bones have already out-lasted the living ones of Methuselah, and in a yard underground, and thin walls of clay, out-worn all the strong and spacious buildings above it ; and quietly rested under the drums and tramplings of three conquests : what prince can promise such diuturnity unto his relics, or might not gladly say, ' *Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim* '? Time, which antiquates antiquities, and hath an

art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor monuments."

I recognise the beauty of the cadence, the felicity and Latin sonority of the phrase ; and I am hard put to it to justify my affirmation that the substance of this passage is but a pinch of dust, and therefore there is not really great style. Even if it be " poetry," it is not great poetry like such sepulchral things as the Grave Digger Scene in Hamlet (which is prose, besides), or certain poems of Donne, or Bishop King's Exequy for his dead wife. I believe that in each of these a human emotion is concentrated and fixed, and that in the prose of Sir Thomas Browne only a commonplace sententiousness is decorated by reverberating language.

We have to face the puzzling fact that in English literature there are a number of writers—Milton, Tennyson, Sir Thomas Browne, and others—whose style, far from " preserving " the content, appears to survive and to seduce quite apart from the content. It is " style " in this restricted sense, that it is not the incorporation of any interesting personality ; it is the sort of style which is a dangerous temptation to any student who is anxious to write good English. It is language dissociated from things, assuming an independent existence. And unless Milton and Tennyson are the authors of the most " poetical " verse in English, how can we say that Sir Thomas Browne's is the most " poetical " prose ?

The conclusion is, that we shall not find the prose poem in the " purple patch." Launcelot Andrewes is, I think, a great prose writer, but you cannot really get at the poetry in his prose unless you are willing to read at least one of his sermons entire ; his style preserves the content, yes, but you cannot get the pleasure of the style unless you interest yourself in something more than the words. Donne also is a great prose writer, but even the passages which Mr. Pearsall Smith has judiciously selected remain only selections. There is no question of separating wheat and chaff, digging jewels out of mud ; they serve as a sample, a taste.

If there is such a thing as prose poetry it is not a poetry of verbal beauty merely. " Verbal beauty " is probably never, in literature, a beauty of *pure* sound ; I doubt whether there is a beauty of pure sound. What Pater tries to do in prose is much like what Swinburne often does in verse : to arouse indefinite evocation, depending as much upon literary association

as upon the beauty of the rhythm. " This is the head upon which all the ends of the world have come, and the eyelids are a little weary." Compare this whole passage about La Gioconda with the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, and see the difference between direct suggestiveness by precise reference, and the meretricious suggestiveness of vague literary association. There is more essential poetry in Turgenev's " Sportsman's Sketches," even in translation, than in the whole of Sir Thomas Browne or Walter Pater.

De Quincey and Poe.—Here are two prose writers who seem to me to deserve a very different distinction. They were both men of very great intellectual power, of much greater intelligence than Browne, or Pater, or even Ruskin. What is remarkable is their range : in other words, their courage and adventurousness in tackling anything that had to be expressed. The difference between De Quincey's " Dream Fugue " and Browne's " Urn Burial " is that De Quincey aims to express a content of some intensity, and that he is not diverted into verbal suggestiveness.

" If, as a musician, as the leader of a mighty orchestra," he said to Lamb, " you had this theme offered you—' Belshazzar the King gave a great feast to a thousand of his lords,'—or this, ' And on a certain day Marcus Cicero stood up, and in a set speech rendered thanks to Caius Cæsar for Quintus Ligarius pardoned and Marcus Marcellus restored '—surely no man would deny that in such a case simplicity, though in a passive sense not lawfully absent, must stand aside as totally insufficient for the *positive* part."

The Image.—But the wide range of subject and treatment of Poe and De Quincey makes it difficult to draw any line between what is prose, in their writings, and what is " prose poetry." I suppose that the " Murders in the Rue Morgue " would be called prose, " Shadow " prose poetry, and " The Assignation " perhaps something between the two. This suggests the suspicion that the distinction between prose and poetry upon which the term " prose poetry " is based, is probably the old assertion that poetry is the language of emotion and imagination—proceeding by concrete images—and that prose is the language of thought and ratiocination—proceeding by argument, by definition, by inference, by the use of abstract terms.

Logic and Imagination.—It proves impossible, however, to draw any line between thinking and feeling, or between those works the chief aim or effect of which is æsthetic pleasure, and those which give æsthetic pleasure in the production of some other effect. The work of poetry is often said to be performed by the use of images ; by a cumulative succession of images each fusing with the next ; or by the rapid and unexpected combination of images apparently unrelated, which have their relationship enforced upon them by the mind of the author. This appears to be true, but it does not follow that there are two distinct faculties, one of imagination and one of reason, one of poetry and one of prose, or that " feeling," in a work of art, is any less an intellectual product than is " thought."

To attempt to construct a theory with the terms I have been using would be a futile building with straw ; my remarks are only valid, if valid they be, so far as they are destructive of false distinctions. I object to the term " prose-poetry " because it seems to imply a sharp distinction between " poetry " and " prose " which I do not admit, and if it does not imply this distinction, the term is meaningless and otiose, as there can be no combination of what is not distinguished. If the writing of prose can be an art just as the writing of verse can be an art, we do not seem to require any other admission. Versification, in any of the systems known to European and other cultures, brings in something which is not present in prose, because it is from any other point of view than that of art, a superfluity, a definite concession to the desire for " play." But we must remember, on the one hand, that verse is always struggling, while remaining verse, to take up to itself more and more of what is prose, to take something more from life and turn it into " play." Seen from this angle, the labour of Mallarmé with the French language becomes something very important ; every battle he fought with syntax represents the effort to transmute lead into gold, ordinary language into poetry ; and the real failure of the mass of contemporary verse is its failure to draw anything new from life into art. And, on the other hand, prose, not being cut off by the barrier of verse which must at the same time be affirmed and diminished, can transmute life in its own way by raising it to the condition of " play," precisely because it is not verse.

The real decadence in literature occurs when both verse and prose cease their effort : Alexandrianism, or more truly Georgianism, is present when verse becomes a language, a set of feelings, a style quite remote from life, and when prose becomes a mere practical vehicle. The attempt to impart motion to this lifeless condition may result in such writing as is now pretty current in America : verse which is simply *prosaic*, and prose which is simply *artificial*, and verse again which mimics the artificiality of the artificial prose.

Practical Conclusion.—We must be very tolerant of any attempt in verse that appears to trespass upon prose, or of any attempt in prose that appears to strive toward the condition of " poetry." And there is no reason why prose should be confined to any of the recognised forms, the Novel, the Essay, or whatever else there may be in English. I have heard Mr. James Joyce's " Ulysses " condemned on the ground that it is " poetry " and therefore should have been written in verse ; whereas it seems to me to be the most vital development of prose that has taken place in this generation. I only wish to take the precaution of looking upon the Monna Lisas of prose, the drums and tramplings of three conquests, the eloquent just and mightie deaths, with a suspicious and interrogating eye, and making quite certain what, if any, solid and genuine bit of life they have pounced upon and raised to the dignity of poetry.

Poetry in Prose

By Frederic Manning.

PLATO treated art as a kind of child's play, and artists as mimics, wizards, and makers of images ; but his affectation of superiority was not intended to be taken too seriously, it was a part of the Platonic or Socratic irony veiling the serious intention beneath it. He was before Aristotle in defining the method of art as *mimesis*, and its function as *katharsis*, but he touched on art only in its relation to the doctrine of sense. The æsthetic problem and the artistic problem are

separate and distinct : the proposition that " beauty is truth, truth beauty " has no interest to the artist as artist : he is not immediately concerned with either beauty or truth ; he is concerned with magic, and images, and mimicry. Plato having defined the method of art as *mimesis* proceeded to distinguish between the imitation of reality and the imitation of phantasy, a distinction which Wordsworth, following W. Taylor, made in his turn between the fancy and the imagination. But Plato's object was the ultimate reality underlying the fleeting appearances of sensation : it was a philosophic, not an artistic object.

The supreme example of literary criticism is Aristotle's treatise on poetry ; but the whole of Aristotle's method and system grew out of the previous work of Socrates and his followers ; and even in this short treatise the definition of poetry as *mimesis*, its object as *katharsis*, and the distinction of imagination from phantasy, all of Platonic origin, are assumed, and Aristotle limits himself to showing the origin, growth, and development of Attic tragedy. The value of Greek literature to us, apart from the value of the masterpieces composing it, is that it is a literature which has completed itself ; and while it is right to insist, as the Professor of Poetry insisted recently, on the difference between one language and another, everything which it is possible to do and make with language the Greeks did and made ; for, though languages may differ, the methods and function of that form of art which uses language as its material remain essentially the same.

The analysis of Aristotle resolved the substance and structure of tragedy into the several elements of which it was composed. When a good English translation is used the method and results are apparently simple and clear, but the text presents serious difficulties. One of these difficulties concerns the retention or the omission of the term ἐποποιία in a sense applicable to both prose and verse (1447. a. 28). The passage in Bywater's translation is rendered : " There is further an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose or in verse, and if in verse in some one or in a plurality of metres. This form of imitation is to-day without a name. We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic Conversation ; and we should still be without one even if the

imitation in the two instances were in trimeters or elegiacs or some other kind of verse—though it is the way with people to tack on ' poet ' to the name of a meter and talk of elegiac-poets and epic-poets, thinking that they call them poets not by reason of the imitative nature of their work, but indiscriminately by reason of the metre they write in." Bywater discussing this passage in a note says that " Those who retain ἐποποιία with the addition of ἀνώνυμος at the end of the sentence suppose it to mean word-poetry. Such a special and unique sense, however, for a term like ἐποποιία is highly improbable, and also against the analogy of all the similar compounds. . . And even if the word could bear its new meaning it would be inappropriate here, as the Mime and the Socratic Conversation were prose imitations, not poems. To a Greek of Aristotle's time the idea of a prose poem would have seemed a contradiction in terms."

The statement contained in the last sentence is questionable. The sole distinction which it is possible to make between prose and poetry is that made by Demetrius, in his treatise on eloquence, and this is a formal distinction to the effect that " poetry is articulated by measures and prose by members " ; and the whole drift of Aristotle's criticism is against such formal distinctions, as his reference to Homer and Empedocles, in the next sentence, proves. Aristotle was concerned with the essential nature of poetry, and to him verse was not essential ; there is even a trace of contempt in his reference to elegiac poets and epic poets. The imitation of a measure in verse is not poetry, but poetry is an imitation of life. This is what Plato intended when he described artists as mimics, wizards, and makers of images. As Sidney put it, there are poets without versing.

Aristotle tells us that tragedy originated with the Dithyramb, and the statement has given rise to many ingenious theories, most of which have been settled, summarily, by Sir William Ridgeway. Aristotle was not concerned with comparative religion or social anthropology ; he was concerned with the art of poetry. Plato in more than one passage speaks of " the epic poets, and the tragic poets and the makers of dithyrambs " ; and, in the *Republic*, it is said : " Poetry and mythology are in some cases wholly imitative—instances of this are supplied by tragedy and comedy ; of the opposite style in which the poet is the only speaker, the dithyramb is the

best example ; and the combination of both is found in the epic and some other styles of poetry." Clearly this passage shows the three kinds of poetry recognised by the Greeks, dramatic, dithyrambic or lyric, and epic. If that part of the epic which is not dramatic is dithyrambic then the dithyramb originally was a kind of narrative ballad. Bentley discovered the origin of the epic in primitive ballads, just as Aristotle found in them the source of tragedy ; and moreover Aristotle insists upon the dramatic character of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* : " the structure of the two Homeric poems is as perfect as can be ; and the action in them is as nearly as possible one action."

If the dithyramb were originally a narrative ballad, how did it become mimetic ? The ballad of *Sir Patrick Spens* is the rudiment of tragedy. Sir William Ridgeway in his *Origin of Tragedy* upheld the Sicyonian claim that tragedy began in the wailing for Adrastus ; and in this connection it is interesting to remark that Dr. Margoliouth derives the word tragedy not from the Greek word for he-goat, but from τραγίζειν " to be cracked in the voice " as of a boy's voice, and a tragic song is thus a song of irregular pitch. As Aristotle observed, " he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing ; distress and anger for instance, are portrayed most truthfully by one who is feeling them." The whole range of emotion can be imitated in the voice.

Naturally enough one connects Greek tragedy with the great choral odes in which the poem, the melody, and the dance were woven together by the rhythm, and Pindar boasts that there were encomiastic songs before strife began between Adrastus and the sons of Cadmus. Arion of Methymna was held to be the inventor of the dithyramb ; but the Lesbian school of poets stand apart from the later poets of the mainland. The mention of Lesbos brings Sappho to mind ; and Demetrius says that when Sappho sings of love, or spring, or the halcyon the very texture of the words is stained by beauty, but when she mocks the clumsy bridegroom or abuses the porter at a wedding the language is realistic and he cannot imagine it sung to the lyre or chanted by a chorus, unless there were such a thing as a χορὸς διαλεκτικός. Turning to tragedy again we see the same realism informing the methods and material of dramatic poetry : the

simplest form of tragedy is that in which the primitive ballad has, through the application of realism, become a χορὸς διαλεκτικός.

Realism, too, destroys the primitive trochaic dance measures, as Aristotle observed, and these are replaced by the iambic line as more conversational : nature showing the way. There would thus seem to be a moment in the growth of tragic poetry when the poem, the melody and the dance are perfectly fused in a single rhythm, and then we must imagine the elaborate unity falling asunder into the several parts of which it was composed. Aristophanes derides Euripides for having been corrupted by the dialectics of Socrates. Pratinas rebukes the insubordination of the flutes. Orchestic gesture is neglected.

It is a vulgar error to consider prose as though it were almost a synonym for language. Prose, one may be told, is written language ; and thus no more than the rude material with which the poet works. On the contrary, poetry is continually tending toward the form of prose. Verse is a primitive, a spontaneous and irrational mode of expression. In the imaginative use of language, that is to say in literature, there are three stages : the dithyrambic or lyric, the epic or tragic, and finally the dialectic or rhetorical. Just as the original nature of the dithyramb persists in the epic or in the tragedy, so, too, it persists in the great orators. Everyone knows the passage in Plato's *Phædrus*, to which Dionysius of Halicarnassus refers when he wrote : " He was aware of his own lapse from good taste and gave it the name of ' dithyramb ' ; a thing I had thought shame to say, true though it be. This trait in him appears to me to be due to the fact that although he was bred among the Socratic dialogues, which were most spare and most exact, he did not continue under their influence, but became enamoured of the artificiality of Gorgias and Thucydides." * It is in the praise of Love, in the *Phædrus*, that the Platonic Socrates becomes dithyrambic, and this speech was written in rivalry with Lysias. Plato, then, wrote dithyrambic, or lyrical, prose ; and yet Bywater held that the idea of a prose poem to the Greeks would have been a contradiction in terms.

The speech in the *Phædrus* is not the only example of prose poetry in the Platonic dialogues. The later *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Protagoras*

* Dionysius of Halicarnassus : Roberts.

are full of metrical suggestion, sometimes, of course, used with the effect of parody. Nor is Plato the only example. Demetrius says : " A certain charm and grace will perhaps be attained if we frame the composition by measures—in whole measures or half measures. . . Even a general metrical character will produce the same effect. . . . The trait is a favourite one with the Peripatetics as well as with Plato, Xenophon, and Herodotus." Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is filled with illustrations from the poets, so is the treatise by Demetrius. Practically every figure used in rhetoric is derived from the poets and more especially from the lyrical poets of the mainland Stesichoras, Simonides, and Pindar. Terms like περίοδος and κῶλον originated in the technique of the lyrical poets. The succession of periods masked the monotony of verse ; but in Pindar the period has not only overflowed the line, it has overflowed the strophe, and even the triad. It is as though the metrical system of a poem were designed only to contain the more subtle and intricate rhythms of prose. But even the distinction, quoted from Demetrius, that poetry is articulated by measures, and prose by members, is not an essential, but an accidental distinction. The rhythm of early dance measures was governed by the beat of the foot, the rhythm of prose is governed by breathing ; style in prose, as eloquence in oratory, is thus a physical fact, for the author is speaking, though it may be only to himself. Prose has the advantage over oratory in the fact that its processes are more deliberate, and its effects more precise : since there is no need for haste it may be at once simpler and more correct : but there is always an implication of gesture in fine writing. Since the rhythm of prose depends entirely upon breathing, it reflects perfectly the physical distress of one labouring under any passion, or touched either by sorrow or joy. It may be completely mimetic. There is a passage in the *Poetics*, which has been usually mistranslated, where it is said that after passing through successive changes Tragedy stopped on attaining its true nature. The word is usually translated as ' form ' which leads us to think the perfect tragedy must have the conventional structure of a Greek tragedy ; and yet tragedy might find its complete nature in prose, which no less than verse may concern itself with magic, and mimicry, and the making of images.

A Note on Poetry in Prose

By Richard Aldington.

THE words " prose poem " and " poem in prose " seem to suggest to most people something impotent or unwholesome—we need not stay to enquire why. It is more important to try to discover whether there is such a thing as " poetry in prose," since Mr. Eliot seems to doubt it. If this were a barren discussion of terms or merely an attack on some academic strong-point then the subject could have no public interest. But in spite of the purism of eminent Anglo-Saxon critics, in spite of the aversion of the public, those who are familiar with French literature of the last century will be very certain that there is such a thing, for you cannot read modern French at all persistently without finding that the phrases "*poème en prose*," "*poète en prose*" are used continually. Many French critics recognise in the *poème en prose* a distinct literary *genre* which they trace back in their language at least as far as Rousseau. You may say that what is true for one language is not necessarily true for another, but that objection may be met by examples ; or you may say more pertinently that the "*poème en prose*" is not a distinct *genre* at all but merely a kind of prose which has no relation to poetry.

Now in matters of this sort writer and reader alike become involved in confusion from a lack of precise definition of terms, and unhappily precise definition of terms is extremely difficult to make intelligently and almost impossible for everyone to agree about. What is poetry ? " Ask him who loves : What is love ? " I shall not attempt to define poetry any more than I shall attempt to define prose, because no metaphysical definition will satisfy everyone, and, even if it did, I doubt whether it would help us to love literature more or even to understand it better. Nevertheless the reader must temporarily accept the distinction between " prose form " and " prose," for our having one word for the two things has caused endless confusion. " Prose form " then would be the equivalent of " verse " and " prose " the equivalent of " poetry " : in other words, we must distinguish between the form which is verse and the thing which

is poetry, and between the form which is prose and the thing which is prose. The most scrupulous of purists will hardly assert that everything written in verse is poetry ; nor will he say that everything in prose form is good prose. His attitude, as I understand it, is reasonable and has a certain provincial tradition behind it. His view is that there is a prose content which can only be perfectly expressed in prose form and a poetic content which can only be perfectly expressed in verse form ; therefore it is absurd to talk of " poetry in prose," for either the writer is ignorant and mistakes his form or he is perverse and has attempted the impossible. That is a logical attitude ; it is the attitude of many educated persons ; it looks irrefutable. I believe it to be contrary to facts, for the simple reason that human ideas, sentiments, perceptions, emotions, feelings, are not arranged in two separate categories labelled " prose " and " poetry," but are interfused and interdependent.

If you will look at " The Banquet," about two-thirds of the way through, you will find Diotima says that " we take a particular species and apply to it distinctively the name of that which is universal " ; and being asked for an example, she gives " poetry." I am anxious to avoid any chicane by trying to fit the widest Greek meaning of poetry on to the narrowest English meaning. It is obvious that when an Englishman uses the word " poetry " he means as a rule the sort of composition in verse which pleases him ; if he is pressed for a closer and neater distinction he will almost certainly take refuge in a vague discourse of metres, rhythms, harmony of words, singing and dancing, and I know not what. That is beside the point. It is a fallacy to think that harmony of words is the quality which chiefly distinguishes poetry from prose. There are far more essential qualities than mere harmony. A piece of writing is not poetry if it has not " the word which creates an image, the unexpected and precise phrase rendering objects palpable to the senses, the art which creates in the reader emotions, perceptions, sensations similar to those of the writer." These considerations, which may be very greatly amplified (as I have amplified them elsewhere) lead to the conclusion that actually there is " poetry " where there is creation, where there is style. If " poet " be the proudest title a writer can justly claim—and it is—how can we be content with an

æsthetic which grants that title to Mr. Kipling and Sir William Watson and denies it to Mr. Conrad and James ?

Is it not possible that " song " has become confounded with " poetry," that the word " poetry " has not only shrunk from its original meaning of " creation " to one very much more limited, but that this limited meaning has by subtle abuse become still further reduced to " song " ? The contemporary dislike of the long poem is perhaps simply a confirmation of this, for obviously you cannot sing some twenty thousand lines even if the ancients did call their novels in verse " songs." Our tendency is to make the word " poem " almost synonymous with " lyric poem."

Critics, editors and public alike seem to lose their sense of language in the presence of verse ; absurdities which would not be tolerated in the poorest prose writer are quoted with approval when written in verse. A vague intoxication, a somnolence of the brain, provoked by a noise of words, is what is required of " poetry." The following appeared recently in the two best literary periodicals of this country. Quoted approvingly by one :

" . . . their deafened ears,
Blind eyes and hasty hands, no more pursue."

Published in the other as a contribution :

" . . . Ishmael arose
And burst . . ."

Of course these are trifles, and prove little except carelessness. Perhaps it would be more useful to consider why our best verse writers so often appear antiquated and intellectually stunted compared with our best prose writers—our " poets in prose." Mr. Doughty's verse may be the right Heliconian brand, I do not dispute it ; but how undisciplined, how strangely inchoate and barbarous ! How restricted and deciduous Mr. Hodgson's tropics are compared with Mr. Conrad's, how hesitating and crude Mr. Masefield's realism compared with that of Mr. Wells and Mr. George Moore ! What a gentle prating Mr. De la Mare's verse is, however delightful ! Even the poets who are trying to be up to date cannot really be considered equal to the prose writers. Mr. Eliot is not

so exquisitely funny as Mr. Max Beerbohm ; Mr. D. H. Lawrence rasps so painfully ; Mr. Flint is so domestic ; Mr. Pound so very provincial ; Mr. Monro so painstakingly trivial. No ; either we must admit to the exultant novelist that poetry has become desiccated and childish or we must extend our definition of poetry, we must seek our poetry among the prose poets.

Mr. Eliot asked me for a definition of " poetry in prose " and I replied, under protest, " poetic content in a prose form." It was not hard to dissolve that hasty phrase into nothing ; nevertheless a man of goodwill can see what is meant if he will accept it merely as an attempt to sum up in a phrase something which can only be adequately defined in a book. Here I must be content to give a hint of my meaning by a few examples. But there are one or two remarks which may prove useful.

One great difference between modern and ancient authors is that the latter nearly always evoke an object or state an idea in its most general sense, whereas the former nearly always evoke particularities, details. An example is quoted by the Goncourts in their Journal, the " dulces moriens reminiscitur Argos " of Virgil ; a modern author (they say) would immediately reject this vague, general evocation and would seize on some vivid detail to convey his meaning. This tendency, which can hardly be denied, I think (see, for example, M. Julien Benda's " Belphégor " and his preface to Chateaubriand's " Vie de Rancé "), may be noticed in literature when a nation has passed a certain stage of complexity of civilisation. General truths become truisms and no longer suffice ; stranger and rarer aspects are sought, individuality and exceptional natures are highly admired. The expression of this state of mind tends to take a prose rather than a verse form. It is no longer sufficient to say of a girl that she is " white-armed " ; the writer's audience wish to know her as an individual. Yet this wealth of detail and *nuances*, this refinement of emotion and sensibility, demanding for expression the subtler medium of prose, do not deprive an author of his need for poetry nor his audience of their love of it. Thus the novels of the complex Græco-Roman civilisation, written when literature generally tended rather to prose than to verse, contain passages of

verse and many prose passages which are absolutely poetic in content—as, for example, the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius. The same thing may be observed in mediæval stories (" Aucassin and Nicolette "). Many excellent modern novels do not keep the " classic " unity of tone which is found in Voltaire and even in Flaubert's realistic novels ; and, as passages of verse are forbidden him by custom, the novelist simply expresses his poetic feelings in prose. The earlier portions of May Sinclair's " Mary Olivier " are poetry in prose, and so are small portions of Mr. Joyce's " Ulysses " and large portions of Mr. Conrad's adventure stories.

Eloquence, splendid diction, nobility of sentiment do not of themselves necessarily constitute " poetry in prose," but there is absolutely no reason why they should not be present. It is possible to carry a dislike of rhetoric too far and to deprive literature of some of its excellencies under pretext of purifying it from abuses. Mr. Eliot seems to have an unreasonable fear of the *ore rotundo*, which, for all the abuse made of it, has its place. It is curious to find that Dryden defines blank verse as " a kind of measured prose "—which, by the way, may serve to show how exceeding wary we need to be in defining our æsthetic pleasures. I think all he meant to say at the moment was that in his opinion poetry could not exist without rhyme. But if we take Burke and Bossuet as respectively the greatest orator of England and of France, may we not say that there are moments when their eloquence—their pomposity if you like—is warmed by emotion into a glow, an excitement which is poetry ? There are passages in the " French Revolution " which create such admiration in the reader that the greatest verse can do no more, while the effect of the funeral oration over Condé is almost physical in its intensity. But the " Venez, peuples, venez maintenant," the " I thought ten thousand swords," the " O eloquent, just and mightie death " are not necessarily poetry because they are splendid dithyrambs (though I confess I cannot see what more anyone can want), nor the more sober and stately " He that goeth about to persuade a multitude " and the " Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation." The beauty of such passages makes the mind tremble with excitement, and how does the emotion created in us by these fragments of Bossuet, Burke, Raleigh, Hooker and Milton, differ essentially from that created in us by

fragments of great verse ? (Or is the difference subjective ? Is it that some minds are more easily moved by beautiful words than others, just as other minds are not to be moved at all ?) But even if these are not poetry, even if the speech of Agathon in " The Banquet " and the second speech of Socrates in the " Phædrus " are not poetry, can it be denied that Longus's " Daphnis and Chloe " is poetry in prose of a delicate, idyllic sort—as if the Sicilian poets were reinterpreted in prose form ? Can we say that this is not poetry :

" Beloved Pan, and all ye other deathless gods who here abide, grant me to be beautiful in the inner man, and all I have of outer things to be at peace with those within. May I count the wise man only rich. And may my store of gold be such as none but the good can bear."

Phædrus, need we anything more ?

It has been stated by some eminent person, whose name I forget, that the authorised version of the Song of Solomon is the perfection of English prose because it never becomes poetry. Consider the enormity of that statement, for if the English version of the Song of Solomon is not poetry, what then *is* poetry ? It is plain to me that the authorised version of the Song of Solomon is poetry in prose of the highest order, like much of Isaiah, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. (If Swinburne's " Aholibah " is poetry, why is not the 23rd chapter of Ezekiel from which he took it; and if Ezekiel is poetry, how can you deny that there is such a thing as poetry in prose and how can you say that the modern artist must not use it as a form ?) The Latin version of the Psalms is perhaps more beautiful than the English ; it can hardly be doubted that the Vulgate inspired the " proses " of the Middle Ages which are certainly " poetic content in prose form " even though they were invented merely to remind the choir of their notes. I shall not of course quote passages from the Bible which everyone knows, but the reader will find plenty to think about in Migne's " Patrologia Latina," in Remy de Gourmont's " Latin Mystique " and in the " Proses " of Notker and Gottschalcus. The significance of this church poetry in prose will not be missed by the impartial enquirer. Religious sentiment, particularly that of Christianity, seems

often to choose poetry in prose as its form—I need only cite St. Augustine and Chateaubriand (" Génie du Christianisme " especially). Even Renan, whose prose is so clear, so even, so tranquil, so " unpoetic," wrote one magnificent poem in prose, the " Prayer on the Acropolis."

Such reference could be carried on almost indefinitely. I shall make but one more before quoting one or two passages for comparison—and that is Landor. Landor, I know, hated Plato (the fountain-head of our poetry in prose) and thought him a rhetorician, but for all that Landor is one of Plato's descendants, for he, too, is a great poet in prose. Two accepted critical dicta are false in Landor's case : He was a better poet in Latin verse than in English verse and a better poet in English prose than in either. Take the finest passages of the Hellenics—and there is great beauty in them if it is searched for—and compare them with the best of the " Imaginary Conversations " and " Pericles and Aspasia." When Landor is really warmed up, when for a time he forgets that Pascal is his model and Diogenes his master, he writes poetry in prose of unforgettable loveliness. Is it necessary to mention among the most obvious passages the " Laodameia died," the image of the sea flinging himself down like a giant laden with spoils, the divine Epicurus dialogues ?

Here, by way of conclusion, are two passages from English and two from French, chosen rather at hazard than by mature reflection, simply to illustrate the difference between prose which is essentially poetic and prose which is essentially prosaic or " prose-ish," illustrating, that is to say, the difference between poetry in prose form and prose in prose form.

"All her excellencies stand in her so silently, as if they had stolen upon her without her knowledge. The lining of her apparel, which is herself, is far better than outsides of tissues ; for though she be not arrayed in the spoil of the silkworm, she is decked in innocence—a far better wearing. She doth not, with lying long in bed, spoil both her complexion and conditions ; nature hath taught her too immoderate sleep is rust to the soul ; she rises, therefore, with Chanticleer, her dame's cock, and at night makes the lamb her curfew. In milking a cow, and straining the

teats through her fingers, it seems that so sweet a milk-press makes the milk whiter or sweeter ; for never came almond-glore or aromatic ointment on her palm to taint it."

(Sir Thomas Overbury : " Characters.")

" So we get the *eruptive* and the *aggressive* manner in literature ; the former prevails most in our criticism, the latter in our newspapers. For, not having the lucidity of a large and centrally placed intelligence, the provincial spirit has not its graciousness ; it does not persuade, it makes war ; it has not urbanity, the tone of the city, of the centre, the tone which always aims at a spiritual and intellectual effect, and not excluding the use of banter, never disjoins banter from politeness, from felicity. But the provincial tone is more violent, and seems to aim rather at an effect upon the blood and senses than upon the spirit and intellect ; it loves hard-hitting rather than persuading."

(Matthew Arnold : " Essays in Criticism.")

" ' Ah ! j'entends, Madame, c'est le blason : c'est à la vérité, une science fort profonde, mais elle n'est plus à la mode depuis qu'on a perdu l'habitude de faire peindre ses armes aux portières de son carosse ; c'était la chose du monde la plus utile dans un état bien policé. D'ailleurs cette étude serait infinie ; il n'y a point aujourd'hui de barbier qui n'ait ses armoires ; et vous savez que tout ce qui devient commun est peu fêté.' Enfin, après avoir examiné le fort et le faible des sciences, il fut décidé que M. le Marquis apprendrait à danser."

(Voltaire : " Jeannot et Colin.")

" L'air était tout chargé d'exhalaisons tropicales, où dominait le parfum des oranges, surchauffés dans les branches par le soleil du midi. Rien troublait le silence accablant de ces midis d'Océanie. De petits lézards, bleus comme des turquoises, que rassurait notre immobilité, circulaient autour de nous, en compagnie des papillons noirs marqués de grands yeux violets. On n'entendait que de légers bruits d'eau, des chants discrets d'insectes, ou de temps à temps la chute d'une goyave trop mûre, qui s'écrasait sur la terre avec un parfum de framboise . . ."

(Loti : " Le Mariage de Loti.")

Or, to mark the difference in two phrases, compare " Un soir qu'il chippotait des œufs qui sentaient la vesse " . . . with " Cela dit, Napoléon léve sa tente qui couvrait le monde."

It will be seen that I have chosen my examples from authors of long-established reputation. I have avoided citing works, usually relied on in this matter, such as Baudelaire's " Poèmes en Prose," Bertrand's admirable " Gaspard de la Nuit," Mallarmé's rather precious "Anecdotes ou Poèmes" and Pierre Louÿs's " Chansons de Bilitis," though all are beautiful and all are poetry in prose. Still less have I relied on more doubtful productions like those of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Oscar Wilde, and certain Americans. My purpose was not to show that people have written short passages of prose and called them poems in prose—which everybody knows perfectly well—but to suggest that there is no defined frontier between poetry and prose, that there are many passages in prose form which in all essentials are as much poetry as Keats and Shakespeare.

It follows that these questions must be settled either in the sense I have indicated ; or, if otherwise, then from satisfactory evidence to the contrary :

1. Is there a form intermediate between what is generally called " prose " and what is generally called " poetry," partaking of the nature of both ?

2. Is it a fact that this " poetry in prose " tends to appear always in mature literatures and that it is particularly noticeable in modern French literature ?

3. Is it not a fact that even in English literature there are many passages from essays, dialogues, novels, etc., which are called " prose " but which are in truth indistinguishable from " poetry " and are therefore " poetry in prose " ?

4. Ought we not then to recognise the " poem in prose " as a definite art form, as many French critics do ?

5. And, if so, may not poetry in prose prove an escape from the sterility and intellectual impoverishment of modern verse and the vulgarisation of prose ?

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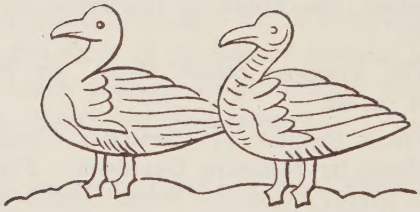

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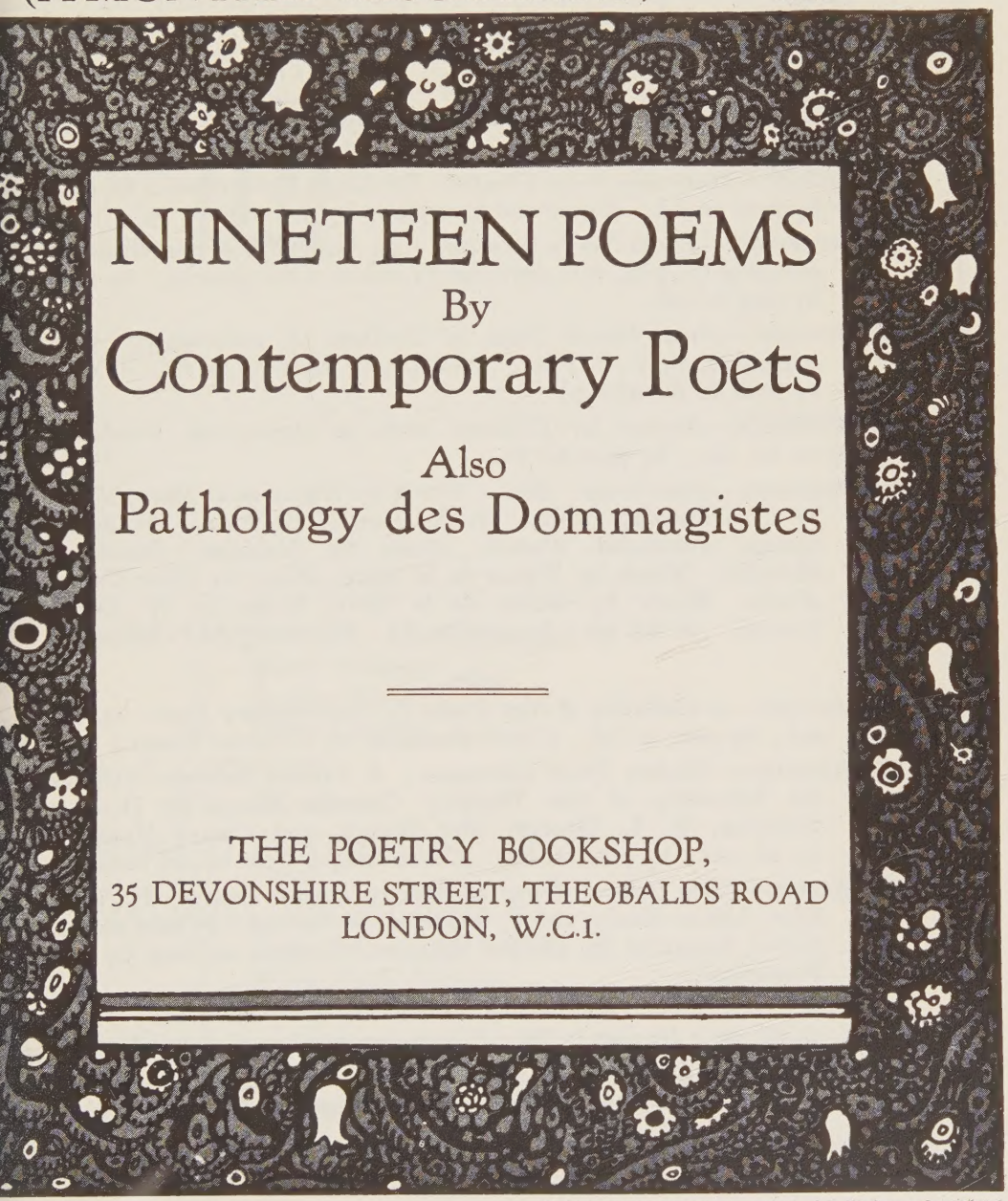

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